

“Intimations of Freedom” :  
the human condition in four novels by J.M. Coetzee

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## Introduction

DAVID ATWELL: Although your work is antiheroic, declining the role of herald to a reconstructed social order, it also seems to project, at a much deeper level, a certain faith in the idea, or the possibility, of an ethical community.

J.M. COETZEE: You use the word *faith*. Let me be more cautious and stay with *awareness*: awareness of an idea of justice, somewhere, that transcends laws and lawmaking. Such an awareness is not absent from our lives. But where I see it, I see it mainly as flickering and dimmed... I am not a herald of community or anything else, as you correctly recognize. I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light.

I first read J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* during my senior year in high school. I had never before encountered such an unsettling narrative, and the interplay of shadow and light described above confounded me: the shadows darker than those of previous works I had read, the light more complex, refracted, disorienting. I felt compelled to explore Coetzee's writing further and have continued doing so for the past five years.

My perception of Coetzee's works and of writing in general – its origins, methods, and objectives – and, finally, how I process and

understand fiction, have evolved throughout the development of this thesis. When I started, I believed that authors owed the public answers, like modern day communal sages. I felt that Coetzee could have answered any question I put forth – and I certainly had many. Now, I see that Coetzee never intended to play the role of “herald,” and he certainly never intended to provide answers. Instead, there exist in his writing specific, tangible contexts that serve to push the reader toward critical questions – questions I feel are essential to my development as an adult citizen in the world.

Initially, Coetzee’s work challenged my concept of the individual in a country undergoing massive historical, political, and social change, and specifically the effects of violence upon such a nation’s citizens. The novels examine the lives of individuals posing questions that strike at the very core of our humanity and what it means to survive, or pass away. His novels follow characters as they struggle either actively or passively to retain a human center when confronted with a brutal, oppressive reality.

There is possibly no more appropriate context for this exploration than South Africa, and Coetzee utilizes centuries of South African history for his settings. Moreover, he delineates many of the causes leading to the crisis of Apartheid and points toward subtle but revolutionary changes founded in the post-Apartheid attempts at re-humanization of the country and its citizens. In Coetzee’s themes, we find that an

understanding of the individual is paramount, and only then can we consider questions of historical process.

My approach to the novels is two-fold: Coetzee's themes intrigue me, and the methods through which he explores those themes are equally engaging and important. His novels contain characters who face a violent world, and the narratives often focus on the body in distress. Meanwhile, the intimate, visceral imagery in his writing performs a kind of violence upon the reader. The effect is not so much to shock us into attentiveness; rather, I believe we are drawn toward the characters even as we participate in their alienation. We are also drawn into these texts by key linguistic tropes. Foremost are relentless repetitions and modifications of specific words which take on a political significance. These features, in their places within and across Coetzee's texts, operate as markers from which a cohesive understanding of the author's oeuvre develops.

Equally significant to my reading are a group of theoretical texts, including the work of the literary and social critics Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin, the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, and sociolinguistic and historian of culture Michel Foucault. After working for two years under the guidance of Marilyn Brownstein, this reading has reassured me in my analysis of Coetzee's work. Finally, in the work of Coetzee's close associate David Atwell, I have found ideas which most specifically reinforce my own.

Coetzee's contribution to the apperception of human evolution cannot be overestimated, in that his work addresses the individual and the individual's country in their deeply complicated interrelationships. And, despite the specificity of Coetzee's narratives and their pertinence to South Africa, I believe the insights can be effectively applied in a more global sense. There will always be a need to more fully understand the human condition, specifically what an individual's most basic physical, spiritual, and psychological needs are, and what occurs when those needs are denied. While Coetzee's ethics do not reduce actions and abstractions into the absolutist distinction of good and evil, his work is steadfast in its opposition to the dehumanizing and disempowering aspects of (post)colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems found in most of the world today. Coetzee analyzes humanity in such a way that can be useful in reminding us that we are all human, all questioning, all alone. And, yet, through the kind of perception garnered from his works, I have begun to discover a form of compassion based in real understanding that might have otherwise been inaccessible.

This thesis consists of two parts – “An analysis of the personal and political in Coetzee's aesthetics” and “Revisions and regenerations: history and genealogy in South Africa” – and each part contains two sections – On Language, On Form in Part I and On History, and On Generations in Part II. In the opening of each section, I present the theory that informs my work. In the first half, I analyze the structural aspects of

Coetzee's writing that support the subversive nature of his texts. Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Walter Benjamin, and Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of elaborate social structures and codifications provide a framework to understanding the fabric of South Africa and more specifically Coetzee's writing. In Part II, I examine the historical, political, and social implications within Coetzee's plotlines and character relationships.

#### TITLE ABBREVIATIONS

*In the Heart of the Country* : HOC

*The Life and Times of Michael K* : MK

*Age of Iron* : AI

*Disgrace* : DG

## **Part I.**

### **An analysis of the personal and political in Coetzee's aesthetics**

#### **On Language**

The production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its danger, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.

#### **Foucault "Philosophy of Discourse"**

A young child sits in sand, drawing pictures over the coarse surface, enjoying the warmth of the grains on her hand. She laughs as she sees images in her head take shape in front of her. She runs to show her mother, insisting that she come and see what a good girl she is, how expressive. By the time they return to the spot, however, the images are washed away. The girl begins to cry, wondering where all her pretty pictures have gone.

The historian Michel Foucault argues that discourse is society's primary attempt at not only conveying meaning but controlling the anxiety of living in a chaotic, disordered universe. He and his compatriot, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, both argue that from infancy we learn to acquiesce to a life dominated by strict and hierarchical organizations

of power. And yet, the same language that draws us into the social contract betrays just how profound is our abjection, our longing for origins to which we can never return. Like the little girl drawing in sand, we believe that by speaking and dialoguing, we are expressing meaning, carving it into the world, revealing what adept citizens we are, recreating our most primary connection. In reality, meaning has a tendency to pull away from us. Even as we struggle against the tide, our words are carried out to a sea incomprehensible in its mysterious depths.

Foucault is often criticized for contributing to a nihilistic worldview that can destabilize an emphasis on materialist analyses. To his detractors, if true meaning cannot be conveyed, then everything is reduced to relativism. This view is particularly troublesome to those concerned with discourses of the oppressed and their attempts to vocalize very real socio-political-economic conditions. I would argue, however, that one might use Foucault's work to advance a critique of oppressive social norms, in so far as it undercuts assumptions of power and order. I see in Foucault's writing an opportunity to unmask the illusions of Reason, Truth, and Order that block our ability to see the violent nature of the world.

In "Philosophy of Discourse" Foucault addresses the Enlightenment notion of Truth as a social fabrication, an ideal toward which one is expected to strive. He asserts that "only one truth appears before our eyes: wealth, fertility, and sweet strength in all its insidious universality"



(220). Just as we are expected to follow matching codifications of language, we must conform to the homogeneity of social productivity and reproduction – all based on an expectation that each person is capable of attaining an ideal existence. Foucault recognizes the extent of this belief's limiting and tyrannical doctrine, and sees it as “the prodigious machinery of the will to truth, with its vocation of exclusion.” In his critique, the most privileged and productive citizens decide the trajectory of discourse and create the rules in their favor, even as they play a game of language and behavior that is inevitably exhausting and meaningless.

Foucault's vision rests on concepts of insatiable desire – desire to assimilate oneself into the social discourse, desire to assimilate others, desire to assimilate meaning. Foucault states that “this should not be surprising, for psychoanalysis has already shown us that speech is not merely the medium which manifests – or dissembles – desire; it is also the object of desire” (216). In my own work at this junction I turn to the master of desire Jacques Lacan. Rose and Mitchell's “Introduction” to Lacan provides an overview of Lacan's theories, and the feminist lens which they utilize is helpful in my own thinking on language, desire, and social constructions.

Lacan's work, a vertical expansion of Freud's, connects the child's relationship with her parents, her acquisition of language, and integration (or lack thereof) into civilization. Similar to Foucault, Lacan views the child's transition to speech as a shift from a direct connection with the

moment and the maternal *real* to identification with the patriarchal structure of the world. Language thereby acts as a substitute and recompense for the lack of the embodied alliance in infancy. One goes from a “whole” or integrated existence, to that of a “hole” in a state of lack, hoping to be filled by discourse and its simulated, or signified, meanings. As Mitchell clarifies: “the identity that seems to be that of the subject is in fact a mirage arising when the subject forms an image of itself by identifying with others’ perception of it” (5). To clarify: the ‘I’ and ‘me’ are conceived of only after the infant understands itself as separate from other people.

In Lacanian theory, the female is at a particular disadvantage in that she does not have a phallus – the main apparatus of male dominance. Her first conception of self is a one of lack, of difference from the patriarchal body. Lacan states that “as negative to the man, woman becomes a total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated into the place of Other and made to stand for its truth” (50); Mitchell and Rose following Lacan do not see this as reinforcing patriarchy but as unmasking its logical fallacies. Both sexes begin as an Other, in that they become disconnected from the mother. Therefore, this construction of “Other of the Other... led Lacan to challenge the notions of ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief,’ and the myths on which they necessarily rely.” In this way, Mitchell and Rose explain the “problematic” aspects of Lacan’s theories by arguing that they “can only be understood as part of this undercutting

of the terms on which they rest.” The female is still disadvantaged, but Lacan’s analysis shows it to be a result of an unfounded social construction rather than a biological deficiency.

Before moving on to an application of these ideas to Coetzee’s fictions, I would like to add the dynamic of race to the category of Other. Minorities are very often conceived of, in social terms, as lacking. In fact, in this disturbing lack of the Other, the males are often feminized and thus constructed in ways similar to females. When this occurs, they are symbolically castrated by a society that, through economic and political means, attempts to deny them the conventional masculine status as provider and authoritarian. And minority women can become even greater symbols of fantasy, through the process of exoticification. Finally, there are many works that explore the position of minorities as objects of desire within a hierarchical, racist culture. Mitchell and Rose share Lacan’s critique that “the absolute ‘Otherness’ of the woman... serves to secure for the man his own self-knowledge and truth” (50). Minorities are Othered in a nearly identical way, establishing an opposite through which dominant males may define themselves.

Coetzee’s writing works against discourses of Othering and explicitly avoids Foucault’s negative notion of a ‘will to truth.’ For example, *In the Heart of the Country*, the second novel, utilizes a first person, female voice that provides what we might call a case study from which we can observe the many functions of discourse that Foucault and

Lacan discuss. Magda, the sole voice of the text, lives with her father on an isolated farm in the South African veld. A timeline is never established, though the technology suggests that the story takes place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *HOC* is constructed like a journal with 266 sections, and Magda pours out her thoughts in a breathless, Beckettian monologue because she has no one with whom to converse. Moreover, she pointedly asserts that writing is the only way in which she exists.

This is equally true for Magda's parents who exist only in her speech. Her mother died in childbirth, and to her father, Magda "[has] been an absence all [her] life" (2). She is well educated and eloquent, and acutely aware of her alienation from not only her parents, but from a larger, European context in which she will never participate. She also feels "lost to history" (3) and recognizes the emptiness in her attempt to find identity and meaning through language. At one point she bitterly laments:

from me only do these flowers draw the energy that enables them to commune with themselves, with each other, in their ecstasy of pure being... because I am here to set them vibrating with their own variety of material awareness that I am forever not they, and they not I, that I can never be the rapture of pure self that they are but am alas forever set off from them by the babble of words within me that fabricate and refabricate me as something else, something else... the farm, the desert, the whole world as far as the horizon is in

an ecstasy of communion with itself, exalted by the vain urge of my consciousness to inhabit it... would that I had never learned to read (48).

Magda often explains her existence as one of only “signs” (7, 27) and “symbol” (12) without “signification” (4). Her words reach no one, and nothing reaches her. She does not even believe that someone will ever read her journal. As she states, “I create myself in the words that create me” (8). Because she was not able to join society’s discourse, she creates a dialogue within herself, centered on her own specific, negating vocabulary. Magda describes herself as “a hole with a body draped over it” (41), “a zero, null, a vacuum” (2), “a vortex” (39), a “shell” (43).

In her ruminating, she concedes that, “if I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman” (41). But Magda consistently rejects the idea that a spouse would complete her. At times she longs for a partner just as she longs for her father to desire her, but ultimately she sees herself as a barren spinster. To escape the pain of such a lonely existence, Magda often envisions herself as a small, disgusting creature: “a thin black beetle” (18) or “a black widow spider” (39) or a “black fish” (71). Finally, she identifies most closely with rocks and pebbles because, “only stones desire nothing” (114). All this reflects her exhaustion in the presence of mutable language and immutable desire.

Magda’s discourse of ‘madness’ – both in the sense of her sometimes incoherent thoughts as well as her constant state of rage –

exhibits two points specific to Foucault's theories. Of madness, he writes that "a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void, without truth or significance" (217). Magda never enters into a 'common discourse of men' and is, instead, perpetually cast out. She says, "I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue" (97); and even with her father's servants she sees that "the language that... passes between [them] now is a parody." Moreover, Magda is terrified by the black servants Klein Anna and Hendrick, even as she desires them. But, as Lacan points out, the Othering by an Other is a fallacy which cannot truly exist, and the colonized eventually turn on the colonizer's daughter. Magda and Hendrick seem to engage in degrading and violent sex acts, but despite the wealth of details the reader must also entertain the notion that the events exist only as fantasies in Magda's head. The tenants take over the house after Magda's father's death, and eventually, both servants abandon her.

Foucault insists that, in order to begin to understand discourse, one must "restore to discourse its character as an event" (229), an 'event' that consists of countless levels of language, power, and rarefication. Magda fears that she "will dwindle and expire here in the heart of the country unless she has at least a thin porridge of event to live on" (23). Consequently, she retells the same physical events over and over, reliving, as Foucault might say, "everything that could possibly be violent,

discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it" (73).

Magda exists at the heart of such an exercise, the heart of "the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse" (229).

Coetzee's third novel *The Life and Times of Michael K* contains another character outside of 'the common discourse of man.' Michael K's loneliness is equal to Magda's, but, unlike the daughter of privilege, he is not well educated, and he is practically mute. Early in the novel, he loses his mother, and has never known his father. Because of his status as a minority with a "disfigurement" (4), Michael K is taught vocational skills in addition to a very basic education. In the first section, we learn that Michael K passed his childhood in a boarding school "with other variously afflicted and unfortunate children learning the elements of reading, writing, counting, sweeping, scrubbing, bedmaking, dishwashing, basketweaving, woodwork, and digging." Michael K, alienated by race and class, never experiences the possibility of joining in society's discourse and begins to wean himself far away from civilization; however, he still vaguely senses the separation and alienation that Lacan writes about: "his memories all seemed to be of parts, not wholes" (49).

Michael K is a man who cannot submit to the "terror" of discourse, as Foucault describes it. After Michael K's mother dies and he escapes from several work camps, he goes to hide in the countryside. In one of his first days away from the city, he thinks, "I could live here forever... every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing

to say. The anxiety that belonged to the time on the road began to leave him” (46). As time progresses, he starts to identify less with people and more with the earth, and he feels that he is “becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (67).

The few times that Michael K’s thoughts are vocalized within the narrative, he portrays himself in a vocabulary similar to Magda’s, using ‘holes’ and insects as descriptors. He is “an ant that does not know where its hole is” (83) and “a story with a hole in it” (110). Throughout the novel, Michael K barely speaks, and “no one was listening to him” (40) anyway. He is an example of “how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166). For all the profound meaning in Michael K’s story, no one around him is willing to hear it. And Michael K himself willfully refuses to try and insert himself into the dominant narrative that is clearly incapable of comprehending him anyhow.

With *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee creates two characters who are excluded from society and unable to find a way in; one excluded because of gender and the other because of race and class. Magda bitterly resents her isolation and vainly struggles, via an outpouring of words, to locate herself and convey her anger. Michael K foregoes this attempt, instead choosing an ascetic existence that does not rely on words. Both novels recognize language as burdened by psychology and social constructions and as a limiting



force that could never convey their true stories. In both novels, particular words arise and are repeated within their characters' personal vocabularies, but these never provide encompassing definitions or answers.

Magda and Michael K's narratives are the skeletal remains of the concept of wholeness attained through language. The reader may be given two narratives of the Other, but she immediately understands that these cannot represent the Truth, indeed that no work of writing can. Coetzee does not keep the reader at a distance, but simply unveils the illusion that there is ever no distance between reader and character. This is not to say that the novels deny the power of writing, so long as one remembers that life and connection to other lives must be experienced, not told.

### On Form

At the center of his experiment is man. Present-day man; a reduced man, therefore, chilled in a chilly environment... He is subjected to tests, examinations... To construct from the smallest elements of behavior what in Aristotelian dramaturgy is called "action."

Walter Benjamin, on the epic dramatist,  
from "Author as Producer"

In his 1934 address to the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, published in English as "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin analyses the position of the radical intellectual in relation to literature and its production. He criticizes the division between the author as producer and the proletariat as impotent consumer, what his peer Tretiakov describes as a "conventional distinction... which is upheld by the bourgeois press" (225). In early 1900's Europe, the proletariat did not have access to the means of literary or artistic production, thereby limiting the effectiveness of its struggle; however, Benjamin heralded the "recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force" (224).

The first concept to be melted down is that of political correctness. Working from a Marxist stance, Benjamin acknowledges the established notion of why and how one is politically correct – namely that a work is critiqued based on its "attitude" (222) toward the revolutionary struggle. However, he proposes an alternative analytical approach that re-assesses

political correctness and emphasizes form in relation to content. Instead of the attitude of a work, Benjamin problematizes the author's "literary *technique*" (emphasis Benjamin) when he asks: "Does he succeed in promoting the socialization of the intellectual means of production?... Does he have proposals for the *Umfunktionierung*<sup>1</sup> of the novel?" (236).

In this essay Benjamin cites three diverse artistic and social mediums – the newspaper, Dadaism, and the theatre of Bertolt Brecht – as examples of *Umfunktionierung*, an examination and drastic revision of previous forms. All three share in their formats a principal of inclusion that involves the audience as more than consumers. In each case, the audience must participate in interpretation as well as production. Benjamin turns to Tretiakov for an examination of the newspaper. Within its pages, there is an overt example of demand resulting in supply, driven by the "impatience" (224) of the reader. Tretiakov clarifies that "this impatience is not just that of the politician expecting information... behind it smolders that of the man on the sidelines who believes he has the right to see his own interests expressed." Similarly, Dadaists worked to destroy the concept of high art, using found objects and abstraction to show rather than tell meaning. Benjamin gives voice to their common

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<sup>1</sup> *Umfunktionierung* : in Oxford's German dictionary, *umfunktionieren* is defined as a transitive verb which means "to change the function of... turn something into something"; "umfunktionieren" *The Concise Oxford-Duden German Dictionary*. Ed. Michael Clark and Olaf Thyen. Oxford University Press, 2004. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Ohio State University. 10 May 2006 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t65a.e37310>>

plea: “look, your picture frame ruptures time; the tiniest authentic fragment of daily life says more than painting” (229).

Finally, Benjamin cites Brecht’s theatre as a powerful mechanism to disrupt our understanding of performance and its attendant voyeurism. Brecht’s management of “interruption” (235) as a principal of plot development stuns the passive viewer and demands that she re-examine the scenario; the power within the process, Benjamin argues, relies on the viewer carrying this into everyday life. Thus he asserts that epic theatre “is less concerned with filling the public with feelings... than with alienating it in an enduring manner, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives” (238). These processes of reinterpretation, resistance, and reanimation all create, for Benjamin, a revolutionary “dialectical transcendence” (224) of oppressive hierarchies.

Despite Benjamin’s hope in transcendence, two other members of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer, illustrate just how pervasive capitalism and the illusions provided by its entertainment industry operate within “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Adorno and Horkheimer attack concepts from the Enlightenment such as Reason and the fulfillment of man’s capabilities, demonstrating how every aspect of the individual and group life have been determined for them by the demands of work and the drive of consumerism. This system operates on either the ignorance of the populace or their compliance based on a false pretense of power. Adorno

and Horkheimer frankly state that the consumer “should be shown all his needs as capable of fulfillment, but that those needs should be so predetermined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer, the object of the culture industry” (142). In this way, the Enlightenment individual has been destroyed, and in fact become an object of mass culture rather than a subject capable of self-determination. Adorno and Horkheimer describe this as “negation” (144) of the self, as well as any “last remaining thought of resistance.”

Adorno and Horkheimer’s alternative analysis and shift in perspective usefully inform my own method of conceptualizing the oppressed individual in a capitalist system. I see this re-conceptualization as a process similar to understanding negative space in relation to positive space within the visual arts. The colonial (and post-colonial) subject/object in particular has always been relegated to the negative space of the master narrative, which dominates the positive space; the proletariat or slave or other voiceless individual exists outside history and underneath economic machinery. Adorno and Horkheimer view resistance to this as futile at best and an illusion at worst. They advocate instead acknowledging the disparity between Enlightenment and reality, needs and the impossibility of attaining those needs. If “the morality of mass culture is the cheap form of yesterday’s children’s books” (152), then “tragedy is reduced to the threat to destroy anyone who does not cooperate.” This clearly establishes consumerism as the

new god or fate and political resistance as hubris with inevitable consequences.

Interestingly, Adorno and Horkheimer mention art as one area where the individual expresses this “negative truth” (130), though not many artists achieve this declaration. Those who have are “great artists” who “have retained a mistrust of style, and at crucial points have subordinated it to the logic of the matter.” Benjamin’s analysis of Dadaism is very similar.

Though the two essays discussed here speak to different objectives, some of the methods are similar; one must focus on the material existence of the individual to understand anything about her particular narrative, and this necessitates a rethinking of every pre-established hierarchy, division, or mythology. Benjamin summarizes: “only the literarization of all the conditions of life provides a correct understanding of the extent of this melting-down process” (231). To restate his objective and combine it with my own: objects, which is to say individuals, previously in the negative space must be brought to light.

A study of the concepts of positive and negative space work well in an analysis of the past and present state of South Africa, for historically that country has operated within the overarching master narrative of apartheid which seemed perpetually to negate the individual – particularly the oppressed or resistant individual. In Coetzee’s novels, a range of voices, from those who remain passively complicit with mass deception to

those who are not even in positions to realize their roles, play out the extremes within a wide range of possible reactions. In either case, it is the *how* in his writing rather than the *what* which is so revolutionary. Just as Benjamin, Adorno, and Horkheimer debase the notions of propaganda and idealism, Coetzee turns away from generalizations and focuses on the individual. To read through a Marxist lens, the revolutionary tendency lies not in any moral but in the specific ways Coetzee reveals the dialectic of the estranged individual and the essential needs of human beings. In accounting for the disruptions in the text, the reader participates in the active '*Umfunktionierung*' of the master narrative.

*In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K* are arguably two of Coetzee's most difficult books with respect to narrative. The reader feels strangely distanced from the main characters Magda and Michael K even as we are drawn into some of their most intimate moments. *HOC* is Magda's story told in first person like a diary and is divided among numbered segments from 1–266. Despite this artificial organization, the entries lack any chronology or cohesiveness; several of the key incidents are repeated and altered throughout the text, and Magda's thoughts often spiral into nearly mad interior dialogues. She speaks as though desperately pleading to be heard, yet at the same time knowing that her cries will go unanswered.

As a result of this complex and sometimes confusing narrative, the reader is thrust into a much more active role than she normally assumes.

Caught between sympathy and doubting our ability to understand or believe the incoherent narrative, we are attached to as well as detached from Magda. We are caught in the dialectic of our own reading and our confused concern. It may be difficult to form a connection with Magda, but the character is impossible to dismiss. Besides the novel's controlled structural instability, Magda's narration remains erudite and emotional throughout. Her dialogues eventually tend toward madness and the only constant in the novel is the earth and its role in Magda's life. This is partly because she is locked into the remote countryside and must grow her own food, and partly because she looks toward natural elements for meaning and self-expression.

On the surface, *MK* appears to be a completely different type of novel. The title character is "not quick" (4) and he can only work in government jobs as a gardener. The third person narrator conveys Michael K's story in a factual manner, often focusing on the menial physical tasks in which he frequently finds himself engaged. Rare expressions of emotion are presented so efficiently that the work comes across as profoundly sparse and lonely. This emotional, physical, and mental isolation applies not only to Michael K but to the reader's position as well. Interestingly, as the novel progresses, we come to realize the political and spiritual meaning behind Michael K's existence. Like Magda in *HOC*, Michael K is closely engaged with the earth, and this eventually constitutes his only intimate relationship. Like *HOC*, the reader is



confronted with a cognitive dissonance that pushes her to work as much at attaining intimacy with Michael K and Magda, as do the characters in their own desperately solitary circumstances.

For a careful reader, the strange amalgamation of distance and intimacy functions as a Brechtian interruption. Distance reflects the alienation of individuals in their particular social contexts; they are only allowed positions as objects. This also holds true in the greater context of systematic commodification; in such systems, one can never fully know another person. The tension between the dialectic of detachment and intimacy in the novels reveals the desire for connection in the reader as well as the character. The reader is constantly in want of more of the story and is still denied the ability to objectify Magda and Michael K. Coetzee allows for complex yet incomplete knowledge of the character, encouraging readers to rethink the role of character – and the role of reader.

A Bakhtinian analysis further supports the investigation of the reader's political transformation. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote extensively on the relationship between author, character, and reader. He began his career alongside Voloshinov as a linguist, dissecting the function of the utterance<sup>2</sup>. Later, in his analysis of Dostoevsky, he sees a new form of discourse within the novel that is both organic and revolutionary – what

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<sup>2</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of Voloshinov/Bakhtin in "Theory of Utterance."

he terms *dialogism* and Julia Kristeva later describes as *intertextuality* (Todorov 60).

Bakhtin regards the individual as trapped in a system of commodification, even within literature. In classical monologism, “only error individualizes” (81) and the author’s voice is the sole, privileged perspective. Bakhtin regards Dostoevsky’s text as counter-intuitive to discourse of this nature. It contains several voices, layers that work to convey multiple meanings; rather than struggling toward a singular Reason or Truth, his novels open up spaces for exploration. Bakhtin reads this as a new discourse, where “the position from which the story is told, a portrayal built, or information provided must be oriented in a new way to... a world of autonomous subjects, not objects” (7).

And yet, like Adorno, Bakhtin avoids a tendency toward idealism despite this creation of open dialogue and sense of newness and freedom. He views idealism as a monologic discourse in that the only tolerable expression and growth within it is toward the same end. The goal of idealism “inevitably transforms the represented world into the *voiceless object of that deduction*” (83, emphasis Bakhtin). Bakhtin explains that, in Dostoevsky’s writing, “there is no evolution, no growth” (26) and his “mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but coexistence and interaction. He saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time” (28). By decentering the notion of a singular,

privileged idea, Dostoevsky allows for a diversifying work that is engaging rather than didactic.

The notion of a “genuine polyphony of full-valued voices” (6) extends beyond the inclusion of several true individuals within a narrative; moreover, it refers to the dialogue of language itself within the text. Bakhtin outlines the various classifications for identifying such a discourse, and Todorov’s “Intertextuality” describes these various categories. In Bakhtin’s writing, the second voice in a double-voiced work is an internal one, the voice we use “when we talk to ourselves” (70). Usually, “this second voice is that of a typical representative of the social group to which we belong, and the conflict between the two is lived by the individual confronting his or her own norm” (70).

Bakhtin’s dialogism and intertextuality provide yet another framework from which to examine forms within Coetzee’s works. In *HOC*, Magda seems to harbor several internal voices which can either contradict or reinforce previous utterances. She retells the same events several times over, each telling a different version. In a classical text, she would be regarded as an unreliable narrator; however, this text equally values each revision. The conflict is never resolved, and the reader must work her way along with Magda. Magda struggles in her lack of an identity except as an object – rejected first by her father and then by the servants. The internal repetition of Magda’s voice(s), a polyphonic narrativization, is the only method for Magda to stitch together an

identity. As Bakhtin characterizes the double-voice as representative of the individual and the norm, Magda struggles to both locate herself and find a place for that self within the small society of the farm.

And yet, we recognize Magda's ramblings as futile attempts to enact change in her existence. She cannot in fact resolve the paradoxes within her life and goes mad from the effort. Bakhtin writes of this phenomenon, and Smith paraphrases his notion. When "the second voice does not occupy a stable position but consists in an incoherent series of reactions ... then the human being... is in danger of losing his mind" (70). Magda exists somewhere between the two. She continually relives the "circumstances of the moment," attempting to find a "stable position."

At the end of the novel, she receives visits from "machines that fly in the sky" (126) that share what Magda sees as universal truths in a language of "pure meaning" (126). This language resembles Spanish, and she tries to communicate with the *deus ex machina*, but eventually realizes that even these voices will not save her, will not provide an alternative. By the end of the novel, one can assume that perhaps Magda never truly wanted to discover her own voice but instead wanted to (and could not) participate in the pre-established social narratives. Just as she tries to translate the language of the strange gods, she wished to have translated the language of society to the language of the physical, the feminine. She exclaims, "the medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge

between so that in me the contraries should be reconciled!" (133). Instead of filling this role, however, she accepts a death "in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near [her] father's bones" (139). Magda finally and completely resigns herself to the negative space of rural South Africa under apartheid and under her father's rule. She dwindles away in isolation and eventually accepts her inevitable, lonely death. The conclusion to Magda's narrative reveals the futility of exile and condemns the reader who would resist engaging with the text. It is only when we become involved with the *Umfunktionierung* of the novel that the author's words take on their fullest meanings and become more than petrified signifiers.

*MK* examines the voice that, from its introduction to the world, is denied any sort of privilege: there is simply no place in the social hierarchy for Michael K. Though his race is never explicitly stated (the reader knows only that he is not white), Michael K is institutionalized for an assumed mental deficiency with "other variously afflicted and unfortunate children" (4). As an adult, he earns a meager wage as a metropolitan gardener. He quits that job, however, to care for his mother, and the two eventually attempt a journey on foot out of the city and into the country.

Michael K's mother does not survive, and Michael K escapes from his placement in work camps and journeys into the wilderness where he subsists on bugs, roots, and a few melons that he grows himself. During

the first half of the novel, there is almost no dialogue. In his isolation, Michael K cannot even articulate “himself to himself” (110), believing that inside was “a gap, a hole, a darkness... into which it was useless to pour words.” First Michael K digs a hole in the ground to sleep and hide in, and later he isolates himself further in a mountain cave, “becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (67).

Here, entropism reveals the extreme reduction of humanity to an object within a society of commodification. Also, somewhat conversely, the entropism serves to reiterate Michael K’s humanity; the corporeal aspects of the text and the irreducible quiet provide an inescapable magnification of his oppression. Michael K “felt hungry but did nothing about it. Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him” (66). Despite this portrait of negation, it is difficult to empathize with Michael K. Coetzee strips this character down to the degree that there remains almost no quality with which one might identify. And yet, the reader is sympathetic, though in a non-traditional sense. One does not feel for Michael K because he is likable, but because he is human, because he is in fact humanity at its irreducible core. The reader’s classic mechanisms for compassion are challenged, pushing her toward a new politics of empathy.

The second half of the novel switches over to the narrative of a man who is put in charge of rehabilitating the emaciated Michael. He is Michael’s near exact inverse: a white man, a government nurse,

incessantly speaking. He provides the first person narrative, emphasizing the degree to which his voice is privileged. Michael – or “Michaels” (130), as the nurse incorrectly renames him – fascinates the man, but he analyzes Michael K according to his own politically correct, objectifying cognitive process, thinking of Michael K as a category rather than an individual. The nurse claims to want to understand and assist Michael but will only accept answers that he wants to hear and feels as though he deserves to hear more. In this way, the narrative serves as both a parody of the audience and a parody of empathy. The nurse – who, in fact, lies in stating that he is a doctor – believes in his own virtuous good will, but cannot understand that he is actually only capable of objectifying Michael. His mission is not one of compassion but rather an attempt to quell his own terror in the face of the irreducibly human. Insisting on hearing more of his story would convince him that Michael K has in fact been allowed a voice. He is the greedy side of the reader, the person who wants to consume Michael K’s story.

Michael exhibits a clear force of will against these demands. He speaks only a few times in this section of the novel and refuses to eat any food presented to him. His time spent in the country seems to have transformed him in a profound way. In fact, it appears very much like the transformation of the prophet in the wilderness; yet, instead of becoming a vocal harbinger of a god, Michael K is the silent representation of a forgotten humanity. The reader can finally understand what the

government nurse could not, that Michael is not a subject/object to the social hierarchy but a living example of an alternative outside of the system.

When Michael K escapes from the infirmary and returns to his hometown, a group of vagabonds that he meets try to help him. They give him some food, and one of the prostitutes performs oral sex on him. Michael K is unmoved during the episode, and leaves them shortly after. Nothing diffuses Michael K's resolve to live out his isolation and he laments to himself, "everywhere I go there are people trying to exercise their forms of charity on me" (181). He understands that they do this because they need him to "open up [his] heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages." The novel ends with Michael K declaring inwardly that "perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time" (182). It is enough, for him, that he is a "gardener" (181); it is enough that he is human, that he is inside the human race but outside the human culture that so utterly failed him.

*HOC* and *MK* both vocalize the voiceless. Magda cannot find a way out of a terrifying labyrinth of words, as she can never secure a whole identity from which to speak. As Coetzee says of her, "it may be a maze she's stuck in, but she herself built it." The only way Michael K chooses to live is outside the prescribed narrative. Each novel, in its own ways, helps us to rethink more familiar constructions of the novel. Just as Magda and Michael K struggle to find a way into and out of social



narratives, Coetzee simultaneously reveals the worn down structures of narrative, as well as the productive spaces around it. It is the brilliant management of meaning that enables us to see Magda's excessive speech and Michael K's silence bring us to a singular conclusion.

## PART II.

### Revisions and regenerations: history and genealogy in South Africa

#### On History

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin “Theses on History”

J.M. Coetzee’s articulation of the past avoids the naïve supposition that one can ever provide an unbiased – or even nearly unbiased – representation, and it particularly refuses to do so on any grand scale. Instead, he focuses on the individual in contest or collusion with history. In two of Coetzee’s earlier novels *In the Heart of the Country* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, he creates characters who inhabit spaces exterior to pre-determined social discourses, either by outside pressures or by personal acts of will; this does not mean, however, they can be read as purely allegorical. The characters are situated with regards to both specific historical contexts and their personal circumstances, while their actions and motivations (or lack thereof) are sculpted from tensions therein. From these circumstances, Coetzee achieves an alternative and particularized narrative, a critique of the discourse of history as it is traditionally understood and written – a

record of those who were once in power, written for those currently in power.

In an interview with Joanna Scott, Coetzee states that “the relation between history and fiction is still a rivalrous one” (100) because narrative is necessarily founded on “abandoning the support that comes with a certain institutional voice... it entails no longer being an expert, no longer being master of your discourse.” His writing consistently depends upon this lack of mastery. By abandoning the institutional voice, the complexities of real human experience bleed out into the narrative and bring Coetzee’s stories to life. Even when his novels are built upon a character in a position of privilege, such as in *Age of Iron* or *Disgrace*, the character undergoes a systematic, deeply personalized deconstruction of power. Thus the novels potentially challenge the reader’s methods of reading and creating narrative both historically and personally.

In J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*, a terminally ill mother in Apartheid-governed South Africa writes a 195-page letter to her daughter in a self-imposed exile. Mrs. Curren describes her many attitudes toward the death slowly taking up residence in her body and recounts her struggle in accepting a political reality she can no longer avoid. As a white, educated, economically privileged woman in a time of mass social upheaval, Mrs. Curren’s lifelong isolationism is no longer tenable. The cancer in her body is a mirror of the encroachment of a proprietary violence into her life, her home, and eventually the essence of her being.

The shock of losing both her vitality and her secure social status affects her in similar ways, though an inevitable deconstruction of her political diffidence occurs within Mrs. Curren's understanding of historic fictions as they are played out in the world around her – a world which will outlive her. *AI* is an examination of one woman's journey away from longing toward acceptance, told through symbiotic metaphors and focused on the dying body.

In his interview with Joanna Scott, Coetzee describes Mrs. Curren and Michael K as “two people at different moments in history acting out of complexes of pressures and desires that are quite individual... my fidelity is ultimately to them and for their unique plights, not to any grand historical trajectory they may be seen as belonging to” (100). Though *AI* clearly engages with South Africa during apartheid's penultimate chapter, we can only access the history and politics through Mrs. Curren's epistolary account, and even then we must accept that it is, and could only ever be, her version.

In Mrs. Curren's “unique plight,” she still clings in many ways to her old notions of belonging and also to her material belongings. She is frustrated that her black housekeeper Florence has brought into the household two daughters and a son Bheki. When the boy brings a friend along, Mrs. Curren exclaims, “I cannot turn my home into a haven for all the children running away from the townships” (54). Florence pointedly asks her why and, later, Mrs. Curren feels herself “clawing on to what she

has left.” And yet she knows that South Africa is “a land in the process of being repossessed, its heirs quietly announcing themselves” (25), its true or natural history recommencing.

The plotline of *AI* reflects the terminal nature of Mrs. Curren’s story and the insurgence of South Africa’s authentic history. The novel begins not with her life as a mother or fully-alive being, but on a day when she receives two harbingers of death. The first is a diagnosis of cancer, and Mrs. Curren meets the second as soon as she returns home: a derelict Mr. Vercueil and his dog who have taken up residence next to her garage. Mrs. Curren says that Vercueil is “visiting himself on [her]” (4) and describes the encounter as an “annunciation” (5); both phrases create the impression that the homeless man is a estranged angel. Indeed, Vercueil remains with her throughout the novel, often as a silent companion who accompanies her on various trips and errands. Vercueil is the only one around when Mrs. Curren finds herself alone and he is the sole person who will help. He eventually helps her into death. Mrs. Curren recognizes the connection between his presence and her transformation from life to death. In her letter to her daughter, she notes that “when I write about him I write about myself” (9).

Throughout their association, Vercueil repulses her, just as the nearness of death repulses her. Mrs. Curren constantly describes how odious and filthy Vercueil and his dog are. More difficult for her to stomach is his extreme indifference. In one of their first exchanges, she

lectures him about finding work. He says nothing and, “with a straight look, the first direct look” (8), spits next to her feet and walks away. It is a gesture that sets the course for the entire novel. It is impossible for Mrs. Curren to romanticize her death, to assume her privilege, to cling to immortality. She opens up more and more to Vercueil and “look[s] for him to care, and he does not” (22). Instead of being an Angel of Death that prepares her for her fate, he simply waits around for Mrs. Curren to prepare herself.

As she increasingly accepts Vercueil, she is also forced to come to terms with the true state of South Africa. In her working life as a college professor, a classicist, Mrs. Curren’s privileged existence had allowed her focus on texts rather than the turbulence of life around her, but *AI* consists of many “moment[s] of danger” pushing her toward a more urgent and profound enlightenment. At one point, Florence must go into the township to find Bheki who has fled the safety of the Curren household and, although Mrs. Curren agrees to take Florence to him, she naively states that “at the first hint of trouble... I am turning back” (90). When they arrive, Mrs. Curren sees for the first time the effects of South Africa’s State of Emergency<sup>3</sup> and is shocked by the chaos of riots and

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<sup>3</sup> “Between July 20, 1985 and March 7, 1986, the government applied a state of emergency in many parts of the country. On June 12, 1986, it proclaimed what became an annually renewed, indefinite, nationwide state of emergency... the government had restored to legalized tyranny” (Thompson 235).

police violence. There are fires everywhere, and it proves difficult to find the young boy for whom they are searching. As Mrs. Curren flees with the crowd, she thinks, “can this really be happening to me... what am I doing here?” (96). She desperately wants to “get into [her] car, slam the door behind [her], close out this looming world of rage and violence.” She does not know the way back, however, and Florence’s cousin Mr. Thabane challenges her desire to flee. He says to her, “you want to go home... but what of the people who live here?” (97). When a crowd surrounds Mrs. Curren, demanding answers, she can merely say that, “to speak of this... you would need the tongue of a god” (99). They reply that her words are “shit.” Before she can leave, they discover that the police shot Bheki.

Mrs. Curren’s experience within this moment of crisis reveals Coetzee’s technique of displaying the intersection between the individual and the historical. Walter Benjamin’s explores this intersection in his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” He describes “the present as shot through with chips of Messianic time” (263), in that each generation is “endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim” (254). At the township, when Mrs. Curren is riddled with the pain of the moment – the moment she had denied for too long – it is as though she herself is ‘shot through.’ At home, she at last is able to ask herself “have I ever been fully awake?” (109) and answers, “do the dead know they are dead?” Even though she describes her life as a “dead

sleep,” she recognizes the incident as “a flash of lightning, a piercing of the fog by the lance of an angel’s intelligence.”

We come to see how she longs for salvation, as she longs for her life to continue. She thinks of Bheki’s friend, a boy who died in her front yard during an earlier confrontation with the police, as an example of how she can save herself: “I must love, first of all, the unlovable” (136). But Mrs. Curren finds herself resistant and, finally, unable to “stop wandering in fog.” She identifies her failure to love the unlovable with her failure to want to live, her failure to have ever lived. As Benjamin states, “our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption” (254).

Despite Mrs. Curren’s encounters with the painful and real present, she never lets go of her longing for an earlier history, even if it was an illusion. And Mrs. Curren’s daughter embodies that earlier history. In the final pages of her letter, Mrs. Curren writes, “I still believe in your love” (197), yet knowing full well that all of her words are “whispered into darkness.” The only embrace she receives after all of her questioning and struggling comes from Vercueil, who “held [her] with a mighty force, so that the breath went out of [her] in a rush” (198). Mrs. Curren’s story ends in this way – silently, and out of breath – a life conceived in apartheid and disastrously wrecked, bereft, out of steam. The reader never finds out if Vercueil sends Mrs. Curren’s letter on its journey across the sea, though one realizes that her words were never



meant to be one half of a correspondence but instead a eulogy for a dying historical subject, likely unheard by her daughter. Because of this, *AI* denies the continuation of the traditional, master narrative, of the privileged voice passing its history and agency to offspring. Benjamin emphasizes the importance of tearing down the illusion of progress, of a history set down like “beads of a rosary” (263). Rather than telling the histories of the ruling classes like constricted supplications for future generations to hear, the moment is the only vehicle for action and salvation. *AI* reveals its inevitable march, as well as the cold fate assigned to those who cannot follow.

## On Generations

To be full enough to give, and to give from one's fullness:  
what deeper urge is there?

Coetzee *Age of Iron*

The longing of mother for daughter throughout *AI* is connected to many other forms of longing throughout the novel: for life, for understanding, for acceptance, and, finally, for death. And, as in Coetzee's other novels, so rarely are any of those longings fulfilled except in death, which Mrs. Curren declares as "the only truth left" (26). In all the questions that arise in the process of accepting death, one of the most persistent throughout Coetzee's writing juxtaposes survival and a connection (or lack thereof) between or among generations. Even in those characters who long for death, the strongest yearning remains one of reconnection with either parent or child. Graver than the acceptance of death is the acceptance of disconnection, of total loss of lineage. Even as Mrs. Curren realizes that her daughter will most likely never read her epistle, she writes as only a mother to a daughter could, explaining, "no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you" (9).

There is also a non-traditional relationship forming between the oppressed black population of South Africa and their children within *AI*. Mrs. Curren is appalled at the hardness she sees between Florence and her children and stunned at the coldness and aggression present in the

youth. She cannot understand that the parents foster such behavior in their offspring because they see violence as a powerful catalyst for change. Florence responds to Mrs. Curren's criticism by stating, "these are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them" (50).

But what, then, are Coetzee's speculations on family? What possibilities (or lack thereof) reside among past, present, and future generations? Is there anything positive to be found? If South Africa's social and political history necessarily ruptured, what does that mean for familial histories? One can trace these questions through nearly all of Coetzee's novels<sup>4</sup>, and I examine two of them here. The parallels and variances therein work toward a fascinating and complicated resolution of sorts, ranging from *Life and Times of Michael K* whose title character is most isolated from his family to the dynamic between David Lurie and his lesbian daughter Lucy Lurie in Coetzee's seventh novel *Disgrace*.

Coetzee's narratives address disparate socio-economic realities within South Africa, but regardless of race, class, or gender, his characters face relentless and critically threatening violence. Often, spiritual, psychological, and emotional needs are devalued or even suppressed in order to concentrate on the physical demands of existence. For Coetzee, though, survival is possible only when the spiritual core of an authentic humanity is retained. Most poignantly, death is inevitable

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix I

once the spirit is subjugated and a person no longer struggles against oppression.

This insistence on the connection between body and soul is seen in Coetzee's focus on bloodlines; for each of his main characters, the spirit craves to connect with what is already in the person's veins. In the novels, desire for mother, for father, for child is often stronger than the desire for corporeal fulfillment. And yet, the political landscape in which the characters find themselves prevents them from actualizing desire on any level, even in its myriad potential for substitution.

One of the most explicit illustrations of this concept is found in *MK*. The main character is a man whose race is never clearly defined, though the reader is made aware that he is a minority with a congenital fault (a harelip): both immutable factors contributing to his alienation. Furthermore, he has never experienced an intimate bond with either of his parents. Michael K's mother regards him with disdain because of his deformity and sends him away to spend his childhood in an institution for the disabled or mentally deficient. His father is never mentioned, though Michael K explains that his "father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory" (105).

After living for years in a utility closet under the stairs in an apartment building where she serves as a domestic, Michael K's mother wishes to return to the farm where she grew up, and the two begin an arduous journey out of Cape Town. She is already ill and exhausted when

they set out and dies shortly into the trip. For several days, Michael K wanders aimlessly in the town where his mother died and afterward wears a strip of his mother's black coat, but the narrator states that "he did not miss her, he found, except insofar as he had missed her all his life" (35).

This lack of emotion reflects both the lack of connection between himself and his mother as well as the oppressive nature of his existence within the political and social landscape. Before enrolling him at the institution, Michael K's mother had to bring him along to her work. There, he learned the behavior expected of poor minorities, especially those with disabilities: "year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" (4). He and his mother are products of apartheid-era South Africa, where the systemic suppression of the human voice has become integral to learned behavior patterns. The socially reinforced disconnect in vocalization is one facet of a system designed to force individuals into isolation, beginning with familial relations.

Michael K becomes even more submerged in this seclusion as the story progresses, saying almost nothing aloud and persistently avoiding human contact. He even fails to recognize the military state of emergency hampering him in his travels. Without explanation, he simply decides to finish the journey to his mother's girlhood home. Along the way, as though acting out a grieving process he does not or cannot experience internally, Michael K progressively loses the remnants of his

mother: first the little money she possessed, then the suitcase with her clothes, then her coat. When he finally arrives, he has with him only his mother's ashes in a box. Michael K carefully places the remains in his mother's "natal earth" (56). The text also makes clear that Michael has no way of knowing that the farm on which he has made his mother's grave is, in fact, the true place of her origins. It is simply an anonymous and deserted farm in the general area of her childhood home.

It is this arrival, however, that marks "the beginning of his life as a cultivator" (59), signifying the connection between Michael K's longing for family and the only passion he displays in the novel. He grows a garden of squash, pumpkin, and melon, and the fruits occupy nearly all his thoughts. The vocabulary used in describing them is distinctively familial and gendered – of the melons, the narrator explains that Michael K "loved these two, which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brothers" (113) and Michael K "marked [the largest pumpkin] out as the first fruit, the firstborn." His presence on the farm must be kept a secret, however, leading him to hide the garden by covering it during the day with foliage and tending to it only at night. During this entire period, Michael K consumes nothing and, when he is not gardening, he sleeps in a hole that he dug into the earth, both behaviors creating the impression of a type of gestation period (more like that of a vegetable's than a human's) before birth.

Thus, Michael is reborn from the motherland rather than the mother's body.

Coetzee's language in this part of the novel asserts that one's connection to family is as basic a need as food. Both act as a form of nourishment that is essential to the continuity of a person's physical and spiritual or emotional existence. There are, however, several complexities within this display that further complicate Coetzee's symbolism. The secretive nature of Michael K's garden underlines the repression of the familial bond, the connections which are lost or must struggle to grow in spite of an effort on the part of the state to suppress such growth. The organic quality of the symbolism further emphasizes, however, the powerful and natural quality of the family, as well as the subversiveness of being a "cultivator" in a dark era like apartheid.

And, yet, Michael K has no real family; his mother is dead and was never a positive presence in his life. Similarly, Michael K never enjoys the fruits of his labor. After months of diligent attentiveness, his garden is trampled and the crop destroyed. Still, the need for spiritual fulfillment surpasses the need for physical sustenance. Michael K resolves that his objective is "no longer a matter of growing a fat crop, only of growing enough for the seed not to die out" (112). Michael K must eventually abandon his mother's girlhood home, though, and the garden he tried to cultivate. He recognizes that, despite his efforts to be a gardener, he is essentially an "unbearing, unborn creature" (135). He also reflects, "how

fortunate that I have no children, he thought: how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country" (105). Procreation is one of nature's most powerful biological impulses, but when material conditions within a society are not met and spiritual development is continually suppressed, one must focus on survival alone.

Michael K nearly starves to death, and, though his starvation began involuntarily, first out of poverty and then because his garden failed, he begins to refuse food even when it is available to him. By the time he is admitted into a hospital, a nurse who takes an interest in Michael K tries fervently to make him eat. Michael K refuses all the food offered to him, and so the nurse cooks a squash in hopes that this favorite food of Michael K's will awaken his hunger. In the country, when Michael K had eaten one of the pumpkins he grew, "he chewed with tears of joy in his eyes" (113) – the only moment of physical passion in the novel. But the offering from the nurse is unappealing to Michael K, and he does not eat it.

In this refusal, one can more clearly understand the political implications of Michael K's starvation. He explains to the nurse during their last interaction, "no one was interested before in what I ate... so I ask myself why" (148). The "why" in this statement is ambiguous. It refers to a curiosity or even suspicion as to why the nurse has taken an interest in Michael K's health, but it could also ask why he should eat now



when society had previously neglected him. The nourishment, both physical and spiritual, that South Africa could provide was not, in actuality, enough to sustain life. Even the white nurse understands this on some level, as he describes Michael K's story as an "allegory... of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without become a term in it" (166). And still he cannot fully comprehend Michael K, who remains an enigma that the nurse cannot stop himself from pursuing vainly.

Michael K maintains his form of subsistence living, and the reader is left with the impression that he will stay a solitary figure. He will never find a place within a familial or social system, because these structures have either failed or become dehumanizing institutions. In the last pages of the novel, Michael K reflects on his journey thus far and realizes, "perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time. Perhaps that is enough of an achievement, for the time being" (182). A few moments later, Michael K asks himself, "is that the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything?" In Coetzee's interpretation of apartheid South Africa, the essential act is to preserve one's own humanity as well as one can, and to wait.

A character of very different social origins than Michael K is the center of Coetzee's prize-winning novel *Disgrace*. David Lurie is similar to Mrs. Curren of *AI* in that he is a professor specializing in the Romantic

poets at Cape Town University and he is white, financially secure, and between middle and old age. Lurie also faces a sort of re-education wherein he must abandon his privileged life and ideas in order to come to terms with a changing South Africa. This process of transformation is, like Mrs. Curren's, one with a trajectory toward death. In Lurie's case, he does not physically die but must still place the self he had known to rest.

Lurie begins the transformation involuntarily when he has to resign from work after raping a student and refusing to take any responsibility for his actions. At that point, he is in full possession of his ego, believing that the young girl did "not own herself... beauty does not own itself" (16). Lurie moves to the country where he gradually becomes intimate with many forms of disgrace and death, all of which wear away at his sense of entitlement and eventually help him to recognize his culpability. To the father of the girl he raped, he explains, "I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused... on the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being" (172).

Nonetheless, there is never hope for salvation; Lurie is pushed toward acquiescence, not redemption. For instance, he volunteers at an animal shelter, but he and the veterinarian Bev Shaw can provide only euthanasia rather than a cure. In an apt metaphor, Lurie befriends a lame dog from which he has trouble parting, though he knows the dog's death to be inevitable. He finally accepts the reality of the situation, and his

own role in it, and he brings the dog to doctor's table. Lurie speaks the last words of the novel, and they echo with their heaviness and implication: "Yes, I am giving him up" (220).

Lurie's intimate relationship with death is not the main catalyst for his education, however. It is his relationship with his daughter Lucy and the events that transpire during his time with her that affect him the most profoundly. On her farm, he lives in a microcosm of South Africa's shifting landscape and its literal and political, historical, and social implications. Lucy struggles to manage as a single white woman alone, and hires a black man named Petrus as an assistant as well a protector. Petrus consistently maneuvers to gain possession of the farm, and one day, members of his family attack Lucy and her father. Lurie suffers severe burns, the house is robbed, and three men rape Lucy.

The rape serves several functions in the plot of *DG*. First, it acts as an unavoidable mirror wherein Lurie must examine his own past, and specifically his violence against another man's daughter. The rape also reveals the violence of renegotiations among the races in South Africa. The brutality of apartheid could not possibly end upon the destruction of the government. Real change occurs in the relations among citizens, and these interactions reflect the ubiquitous nature of the prejudices and resentments on every side of the struggle to create a new national identity. Lurie expresses outrage and a desire for restitution. Lucy sees the rape as her only opportunity to remain a part of South Africa, asking,

“What if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Why should I be allowed to live here without paying?” (158).

The rape is also the clearest point where the reader can witness the question of generations being played out in *DG*. Lurie is inextricably part of the old power dynamic, that of apartheid South Africa. Lucie is of the generation of Truth and Reconciliation and is now part of the actual reckoning and rebuilding. Lucie has a possible future in the country, while Lurie faces only “a desolate yard” (214). More specifically, it is the aftermath of the rape – Lucie’s pregnancy – that provides her with an assured place on the farm. By having the child, she will be part of Petrus’ family and therefore under his protection from future attacks. Lucie recognizes that her alliance must be with the new leaders of South Africa, and very clearly tells her father as much. When he continues to press for her to abandon the farm, she explains, “if I leave the farm now I will leave defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life... I cannot be a child for ever. You cannot be a father for ever” (161).

Coetzee thereby deconstructs old notions of history, alliance, and even family. Lurie leaves his daughter’s farm, and the next time he returns, it is “as if he were a visitor” (218). In the only picaresque scene in the novel, “a scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard,” a pregnant Lucie works in her garden, looking “the picture of health.” The child growing inside her is a complex metaphor for Coetzee’s vision of South

Africa's future – one inescapably rooted in violence, but not entirely without the possibility for growth and even beauty.

The word “generation” takes on a type of double meaning in Coetzee's works. His readers are primarily made aware of the disconnect across generations -- mothers and daughters, sons and mothers, fathers and daughters. Furthermore, one is acutely aware of the many forms of death that have occurred in South Africa. Coetzee unflinchingly portrays the loss of humanity, the dissolution of historical precedence, and the violence sustained by subjects in such conditions. But there is also the potential for some people to escape total annihilation. More than that, there is a type of growth, of *generation* that has begun among the ruins of post-apartheid South Africa. Coetzee recognizes this development as being in its earliest stages, and his novels aim to clarify their origins rather than suggest in what directions the country should or might move next. He is, as he reminds us, no “herald,” and the characters he creates are “shadows” cast by the interaction of light and dark. But the “intimations of freedom” in Coetzee's writing are undeniable, even when they reside in the darkest parts of the human experience.

## Appendix I. Coetzee's Works in English

***Dusklands*** : [two novellas]. – Johannesburg : Ravan Press, 1974. – Contents: The Vietnam project ; The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee

***In the Heart of the Country*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1977. – Published in the USA as *From the Heart of the Country*

***Waiting for the Barbarians*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1980

***Life and Times of Michael K*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1983

***Foe*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1986

***White Writing : on the Culture of Letters in South Africa***. – New Haven : Yale Univ. Press, 1988

***Age of Iron*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1990

***Doubling the Point : Essays and Interviews***. – Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard Univ. Press, 1992

***The Master of Petersburg*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1994

***Giving Offense : Essays on Censorship***. – Chicago : Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996

***Boyhood : Scenes from Provincial Life***. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1997

***Disgrace*** : [novel]. – London : Secker & Warburg, 1999

***The Lives of Animals*** / edited and introduced by Amy Gutmann. – Princeton : Princeton Univ. Press, 1999

***Stranger Shores : Essays, 1986–1999***. – London : Secker & Warburg, 2001

***Youth***. – London : Secker & Warburg, 2002

***Elizabeth Costello : Eight Lessons***. – London : Secker & Warburg, 2003

***Lecture and Speech of Acceptance, upon the Award of the Nobel Prize, delivered in Stockholm in December 2003***. – New York : Penguin Books, 2004.\*

***Slow Man*** : [novel]. – Secker & Warburg, 2005

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